



Press Clipping Article

Title: Farmers encouraged to continue thinking ‘outside-the-box’

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Lead:

“Today a weed. Tomorrow a fuel source.” McCracken County agricultural extension agent Doug Wilson encourages more of that type of “outside-the-box” thinking regarding the manufacturing of ethanol and other fuel sources. Ethanol has triggered somewhat of a national discussion over whether food — such as corn — should be used for fuel.

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“Today a weed. Tomorrow a fuel source.”

McCracken County agricultural extension agent Doug Wilson encourages more of that type of “outside-the-box” thinking regarding the manufacturing of ethanol and other fuel sources. Ethanol has triggered somewhat of a national discussion over whether food — such as corn — should be used for fuel.

“The debate stems from taking food and using it for fuel when there is famine going on in places like Africa and Southeast Asia,” Wilson said. “New things are always coming in agriculture. Corn is used to make ethanol because it is cheaper and quicker. Some suggested that harvesting the entire plant foliage like hay could be used to make ethanol.”

McCracken County corn acreage is up 15 percent to 18,000 acres this year, and the increase is driven by the demand for ethanol, Wilson said. It takes 2.6 bushels of corn to make one gallon of ethanol.

Gasoline prices flirting around the \$3-a-gallon mark have renewed interest in other fuel sources, including biomass — plants grown for use as biofuel. The concept could turn sugar cane, corn shucks and stalks, sweetgrass, switchgrass and kudzu into fuel sources, Wilson said. He predicted some unusual concepts, such as planting biomass crops on interstate medians.

“Think how much that could save. This country has always been on the edge of many revolutionary things. Cooking grease is being turned into fuel. We’re about to become better stewards of our resources than we were in the past,” Wilson said.

“Development of new fuel sources is like the development of computers. Computers started out as a novel thing. Very few people used them in the beginning, and now everyone has one. And that happened in less than 15 years.

“Biomass is the next big wave. There could be an entire industry out of kudzu. The kudzu plant grows 600 feet in either direction in one year. There’s still lots of research to do. We’re probably 10 to 15 years from that kind of outside-the-box thinking. If our government has people thinking ahead, we should be concerned about producing fuels from renewable resources to offset dwindling oil supplies.”

In discussing ethanol, McCracken County farmer Dewain Gipson said it is wrong to cite its demand and higher corn prices as reasons why consumers are paying more for food. While many farmers nationwide are getting up to \$1 a bushel more for corn than a few years ago, increased agricultural production costs and fuel prices are tied to higher grocery prices, he said.

Gipson increased his corn acreage from 700 to 1,000 acres this year, but not to sell for ethanol production. His white corn is food grade.

“Costs of fertilizer are way up. Fuel bills are a lot more. Fuel is a big factor,” Gipson said. “It is such a misunderstanding to blame corn prices on higher food costs. That’s just not the case. A box of corn flakes has probably five cents worth of corn, so you can’t blame corn prices and ethanol on any cost increases at the store,” Gipson said. “We have no control over our yields. There is not negotiation in what (prices) yields will bring. We hope for the best yields possible, but there is no way to pass on our losses. It comes off our bottom line.”

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